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ABSTRACT

A review of research conducted in Egypt to assess the impact of videocassette recorders (VCRs) on society and on other communication media indicates that the use of VCRs--a new phenomenon in mass communication in that country--has been accelerating over the past five years as more people have been gradually exposed to the advantages of unlimited viewing choice. Topics addressed by this paper include reasons for the fast-growing market for video in Egypt, which coincided with deep social and economic changes that took place in the structure of Egyptian society during the same period; sources of videocassettes; preferred types of videocassettes; video and state censorship; the impact of video on society and other media; and the future of VCRs in Egypt. The major sector to be affected--both negatively and positively--by VCR use is identified as the cinema, as a significant decrease in cinema attendance has been accompanied by an increase in the production of videos by cinema studios. Future directions suggested by the research include: (1) VCRs will continue to proliferate; (2) videocassettes will be used more extensively for educational purposes; (3) the range of viewers will include more intellectuals; and (4) the impact of the VCR on other communication media will continue unless these media find ways to challenge the uses of videos. (29 footnotes) (CGD)

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Video Usage In Egypt:

Limits And Effects.

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Video Usage in Egypt:
Limits and Effects.

The aim of this paper is to throw lights on a new phenomenon in mass communication fields in Egypt, which is based on a wide scale use of video cassette recorders.

Studies dealing with video usage in Western societies showed that this usage has established as a home pattern of communication since the early 1970s, with cultural implications as well as economic and legal ones. Many reports on this subject certified that oil-rich states of the Arab Gulf were the first to adopt this pattern. Here, video provides a means of seeing different movies and T.V. programs that may be difficult to obtain, or even banned by governments. VCR's independence from the "official" television systems and schedules is its chief attraction for the audiance. Also, VCR is a vivid symbol of the rich, urban, westernized sophisticate. The ownership of VCRs in these countries can be as high as 80%. (1) Some reports indicate that two thirds of the world production of VCRs is

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1) "Home Video: an Inter Media Survey," in InterMedia, July - September, 1983. P. 17.

headed to the Arab market(2) Others stated that in seven Arab oil-producing countries,* there are more than five million video recorders.(3)

However, this new communication medium arrived a bit late in Egypt. Although the Egyptians are highly sensitive to new technologies, Egypt has not felt the need for video cassettes as an entertainment supplement. With three competing television channels and a well established cinema industry, as well as a variety of leisure facilities, Egyptians in general were not very enthusiastic when VCR became a fad in other countries of the region. But once the medium was introduced at the beginning of the 1980s, the situation became different. In spite of taxes levied on luxury items, and the still prohibitive prices, there is an expanding demand that reflects a growing awarness of the new attraction, and more people are gradually exposed to the advantages of unlimited viewing choice.(4)

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2) Al-Akhbar, Cairo, 17-2-1986. P. 12.

*) These countries are: Saudie Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Iraq, Bahrin, Quatar and Omman.

3) Kousair, A., "Video and Cultnral Progress of the Arabs," in Al-Khadd. Cairo, Vol. 1 No. 2. 1985, P. 57.

4) Abou-Bakr, Yehia, " Egypt: Late Arrivals," in Inter Media, op.cit., P. 48.

Some reports indicate that the number of VCRs in Egypt exceeds a million sets, customs points in Cairo airport recorded that in 1983 around 92000 VCRs entered the country during the Pilgrimage season - which takes mostly one month. Official reports recorded more than 200 video clubs in the country in 1984, but the number of unregistered clubs exceeds 500 clubs more.(5) In Cairo alone, more than 189 video clubs were registered untill 1984, besides many street corner kiosks. In the rest of the country, although some provincial capitals have one or more outlets, video cassette viewers have to rely on the capital for their supplies of recorded cassettes.(6)

There are more than 40 video producing and distributing companies in Egypt. The number of imported foreign films that are copied on video cassettes raised from 544 films in 1981, to nearly 800 films in 1984.(7)

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5) Sorour, Abdel-Raheem, "Rationalization of Video Production and Usage", A report for the National council for culture, Arts and Information. Cairo, October 1984, P. 3.

6) "Video and The Egyptian Society", a report for the Institude of police Officers Training, Cairo, 1985. P. 136.

7) Sorour, op.cit. P. 3.

Why Video?

The previous statistics indicate the spread of video usage and industry in Egypt during the last five years, in a way that constitutes a phenomenon which needs explanation.

The fast-growing market for video in Egypt coincided with deep social and economic changes that took place in the structure of the Egyptian society during the same period.

Since the beginning of the 1980s, Egypt collected the consequences of the policy of an "open - market" economy, that has been applied since the mid 1970s. The social consequences of this policy were the emergence of a new class of traders, profiteers, and skilled labourers, who have less-education, but earn fast-growing income, amid a society of a majority of limited income.

For those, the price of a VCR (around two thousand Egyptian pounds) is not a big problem. Besides, the ownership of such advanced equipment may add a prestiegeous status for an emerging class.

In addition, the open-market economy was steered towards the production of consuming goods, and not for creating a solid productive base of economy, that a developing country like Egypt may need. This resulted in a growing

popular demand, among all classes, towards owing sophisticated modern-home equipments, one of which is the video cassette recorder.

A survey on video usage in Egypt showed that 33.3% of video owners sample[Ж] in Greater Cairo buy VCRs just for the reason of having a highly equipped house. And, 14.8% buy VCR under pressures from their childern.(8)

In addition, the massive imigration of Egyptians to oil-producing Arab countries participated in creating the growing demand for video. With a minimum of social life, dull T.V. programmes, and a limited - or even no cinema or theatre activities, Egyptians in these societies rely heavily on video viewing, and this becomes a communicational habit to be taken back home. For the last five years one of the first questions a customs officer would ask an Egyptian coming home from another Arab country was whether he brought back a VCR.(9)

Other factors, related to video attraction itself, have their impact on the spreading demand on VCRs in Egypt. The convenience that video provides for movies viewers, in

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Ж) The sample included 480 video viewers.

8) Al-Hadidy, M. and Aly, S.E., "Video cassettes: Types of Usage and Effects; a field study," Dar Al-Fekre Al-Araby, Cairo, 1985, P. 34.

9) Abou-Bakre, Op.cit. P. 48.

a country with traffic difficulties is one of these factors. Besides, as large number of Egyptian cinemas are declining as places of enjoyment, families - as we shall discuss later- do prefere spending their evenings around films played in video cassettes.

Sources of video cassettes:

Results of field researches carried out in Egypt indicated that video viewers depend heavily on renting cassettes from video clubs. A survey carried out by Broadcasting and Television Union in Egypt found out that $\frac{2}{3}$ of the interviewed sample own not more than ten video cassettes, and 23% of this sample own more than 20 cassettes.(10) Another study indicated that 59% of its sample depend on video clubs for renting their chosen cassettes. 30% get these cassettes from relatives and friends, or even school colleagues, and only 6% buy their cassettes from Egyptian or foreign-market.(11)

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10) Broadcasting & Television Union in Egypt: "Cassettes Audiance in Egypt". Cairo, 1984. P. 17.

11) Al - Hadidy, Op.cit. P. 43.

The main factor behind depending on renting from video clubs is an economic one. The price of a pre-recorded cassette is around E£ 30, while the rate for rental is from two to three Egyptian pounds. Most reports and researches proved that viewers use VCRs as a mean of amusement and entertainment, and not for recording or making home video libraries. Hence, viewers do not buy pre-recorded cassettes, as they would rarely need them after a while for recording.

Prefered types of video cassettes:

The concept of video as mainly an entertainment medium affected the taste of viewers. Therefore, field research indicated that movies, were the most favourable types of cassettes. 23% of home played cassettes were of Arabic movies, that are dealing with Egyptian social problems, situation comedies, or adventure movies. 20.6% of home viewers prefered foreign movies which deals with adventures and violence. Movies with political content, either in Arabic or any foreign language, were proved to have the least attraction.(12)

This is either because of the limited amount of such movies available in the Egyptian market, or because of the viewers desire to spend their time on light entertainment.

I2) Ibid. PP. 103 - 132.

Arabic plays came in the third priority (16.8%) in viewers choice.[13] However, another research results proved that these plays took the second priority in Egyptian provinces outside Cairo and Alexandria, but still Arabic movies occupied the first priority .[14] This could be due to the lack of foreign-langnage knowledge in these provinces.

Non-film materials such as sports events, or concerts and musical parties, came at the bottom of the list for viewers both from the capital and provinces. Educational pre-recorded cassettes got the minimum interest.[15]

Among foreign films, American produced movies proved to be the most popular cassettes (59%). This is due to the massive amount of American movies available in the market, the quality of these movies with their highest cinema technology and the variety of movies that American studios are producing.

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13) Ibid. P. 103.

14) " Cassettes Audiance in Egypt", Op.cit. P. 34.

15) Ibid. PP. 34 - 5. Also, Al-Hadidy, Op.cit. P. 103.

The Indian film came next in viewers choice (20%), because it includes many types of movies in one production, such as milo-drama, adventures, and dancing shows, all in one film.(16)

In general, video viewers seek programmes and movies that are not shown on television, and sometimes these include edited versions of censored films.

Video and State Censorship:-

A wide debate rose up in national newspapers during the last two years concerning the relationship between expanding demand on video and an observed rising rate of sexual crimes, especially among youth. This debate rose the issue of state censorship on video-cassettes vis-a-vis personal freedom.

However, there are no regulations especially issued to control and legalize state censorship on video cassettes. What is applied by authorities is legislation No. 430 issued in 1955 to legalize censorship on cinema plays and audio - tapes. It drew broad lines for applying this censorship, aiming at protection of law and order, supreme state security and moral virtues Penalties for breaking this law varies from 1-6 months imprisonment or a fine of E£ 200 - 500, or or both. But these penalities are not sufficient to enforce

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16) Al- Hadidy, Ibid. PP. 147 - 8.

the law.(17)

There are two administrative departments responsible for censoring video cassettes in Egypt: General Department for Censonship, and Police Department for the prevention of Crimes of Artistic Materials. The mean of cassettes censored monthly by the first exceeds 1500 cassettes, 40% of which owned by individuals and the rest belongs to video production and distribution companies. However, the number of employees working in this department (12 employees) is insufficient for practicing firm censorship over the massive amount of cassettes the department has to censor.(18)

The Police Department was established in 1981, but since that time it suffers from a shortage of manpower, (only 4 officers and 9 soldiers). It is also a centralized apparatatus, with no branches in the provinces. During 1983, the Department got hold of 28 cases included 3019 illegal video cassettes, breaking copyright regulations, besides four cases of 42 bluesex cassettes that have been smnggled into the country or copied in Egypt.(19)

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17) "Video and the Egyptian Society", Op.cit. P. 65.

18) Ibid. P. 81 and P. 138.

19) Halawa, Ahmed, "Protection of Artistic Materials in A.R.E.", a report for Institute of Police Officers Training, Cairo, 1984. P. 145.

Police records indicated the rising rate of confiscated blue-sex cassettes, during the last five years. In 1981, the number of seized cassettes was only two. But from January 1984 to March 1985 nearly 500 cassettes that contained blue-sex movies were confiscated. These were not only seized in Cairo (66 cassettes) but also a great amount of them were smuggled into provinces of Upper Egypt (274 cassettes), where video clubs hide these materials away from the strict regulations in the capital and the big cities, and where small cafés owners use these cassettes for group viewing, especially in rural areas.(20)

Meanwhile, the wide-scale use of cafés for video viewing, especially for banned materials, led to a ministerial act by the Minister of culture in 1984, banning the use of such places for group video viewing.(21) Nevertheless, this phenomenon cannot be stopped by a mere act, that blindly ban group video viewing. Indeed, it is nearly an impossible mission.

In general, state censership policy in Egypt seeks checking all cassettes that enter the country, even if it is for personal use. Some writers deny the government right to break the personal freedom of citizens. Instead ,the administration should control only the puplic use of cassettes that may offend society's values,and impose firm observation upon video market.

21) Al Ahram, (daily newspaper),Cairo, 21-2-1984.
22) Akhbar Al-Youm, (daily newspaper), Cairo, 28-12-1985.

Video Effects:-

As a new medium, video provoked many trials, inside Egypt and abroad, to assess it's impact on society and on other communication media.

Some views do not consider the wide-scale use of VCR inside the Arab countries as a sign of modernization or development. On the contrary, they believe that video is a way to escape from over - conservatism in some of these societies. At the same time, they look upon video as a main obstacle in front of the development of a national cluture. Investment in cultural fields - in some Arab countries including Egypt - is not heading towards enriching common cultural activities such as building new cinema houses or theatres. Instead, investment in this field is intensively steered towards establishing video recording and reprinting studios.(23)

In Egypt, the introduction of production for video has affected the standard of movies and T.V. serials that are produced inside Egypt or in rich Arab studios using Egyptian talents. Looking for fast easy profit, producing

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23) Al - Kossair, Op.cit. PP. 58 - 60.

companies tries to satisfy the taste of the majority of video owners who are mostly un-educated, and who seek light entertainment, that would meet their values.*

The rising rate of video usage and the growth of video culture, in a developing country like Egypt may cause, in the long run, individual isolation from social policies conveyed by the government in mass media, and consequently decrease state power over society, and inhibit citizens' participation in developmental programmes.

This degree of over-exposure to video culture, has not been reached in Egypt so for. However, if the growing rate of VCR usage continues with the same speed, such disintegration between individuals and developmental programmes may occur. If exposure to mass media creates common values and common culture, exposure to VCR may produce common video culture which could be based on a system of values quite different from those that developmental plans are seeking. Indeed, such outcome of over-

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* For example movies produced during the late years of the 1970s and at the beginning of the 1980s were explicitly undermining the value of education as a mean to success or wealth. In the contrary, traders and skilled-labourers were pictured as wealthy, successful people, who are taking a leading post in society.

exposure to VCR would not exist in developed countries, where the social context is extremely different, and where the system of values is more stable.

Differences between effects of video in the West and its impact on developing countries is explicit from comparing results of researches carried out in both regions. While studies proved that impact of VCR on television is marginal in the West,(24) others carried out in Egypt indicated that a big proportion of television audiance (44.3%) decreased their watching time when they owned VCR.(25) In U.S.A., for example; the main use of VCRs is to record from home television set, and to build a home videotape library.(26) In the Arab world, the principal use of video is to play pre-recorded cassettes, that has been bought or rented, and which mainly contains light entertainment materials.

The major sector that was affected-both negatively and positively - by VCR usage in Egypt is the cinema.

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24) Levy, M.R., "Home Video Recorders: A User Survey", in Journal of Communication, Autum 1980. PP. 23-27.

25) Al-Hadidy, Op.cit., PP. 160-1.

26) Levy, M.R. and Fink, E.L., "Home Video Recorders and the Transience of Television Broadcast ", in Journal of Communication, Spring 1984. PP. 27-8.

After World War II, cinema industry was the second source of national income. At the beginning of the 1960s, there were nearly 450 cinema houses, and Egyptian movies found their ways to the Arab market. Neverthless, for many reasons, cinema industry survived a crisis since the mid 1970s. It became the nineth source of national income, and the number of cinema houses in the country decreased to 170.(27) Then, VCRs came to push the curve of a declining cinema furthermore downwards. Families find it more convenient and economical to use VCR for watching desired movies. Research results certified this fact, as they proved that 72.9% of video owners do not go to the cinema.(28)

However, cinema industry did profit from the spread of VCRs use in Egypt. The number of cinema studios that are working mainly for video production has increased. Also cinema producers gained huge profits from selling copy-rights of their movies to video distributing companies. The price for a movie - copyright increased from E£ 5000 in 1980 to E£ 90000 in 1984.(29)

Thuse, what has been affected by video is not the cinema industry - which found her way to join a "marriage de convenance" with video industry - but it is the cinema as a mean of culture and as a communication media.

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27) "Video and the Egyptian Society,""Op.cit., P. 31 and 68.

28) Al - Hadidy, Op.cit. P. 176.

29) Sorour, Op.cit. P. 5.

The Future of VCR in Egypt:-

The VCR usage in Egypt during the last five years points out to many indicators. First, VCR difusion will continue, both in cities and rural areas, and both on individual and group-usage levels.

Second, the aim of video usage will not remain only for entertainment. The use of video cassettes for educational purposes-especially for secondary schools' lessons-started since last year. Plenty of parents find these cassettes more useful and less expensive than private lessons, which became an addict for secondary schools' students in the last ten years. Educational cassettes are widely advertised in the national media, and on walls of schools.

Third, the coming years will witness the extension of video viewers range to include more segments of intellectuals, who would not persist the attraction of VCR for a long time. The introduction of such group of audiance may affect the taste of video production from mainly light entertainment to more knowledgeable and cultural materials.

Fourth, the impact of VCR on other communication media will continue, unless these media will find their way to challenge video charm. In spite of video attraction in entertainment, yet radio and television have their own special fields that video cannot beat, such as news coverage, reports and interviews. They also have this special live relationship with their audiance, which VCR really misses. If mass media-and especially T.V.- can benefit from these privileges, then video in Egypt can be used also for recording off-air programs, and not only for playing pre-recorded cassettes. And in this way, video usage would increase the total time for watching television.

As it happened before with television, video, the new coming invention, will continue to penetrate the home-electronics market, and other mass media will have to find a way to survive and bury the hatchet.

Nagwa A. El-Fawal.
April , 1986.